



## **COBRA GOLD: A LOOK AT 25 YEARS OF HISTORY**

Cobra Gold 2006 took place 15-25 May and marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of the exercise. Delving into US Army, Pacific (USARPAC) archival material reveals an exercise that has evolved over time to meet the changing needs of the participating countries' militaries. While evolving into a highly sophisticated exercise, Cobra Gold remains a keystone of combined, joint military exercises conducted by the US with Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states.

Cobra Gold's roots can be traced back to 1965 and Operation TEAM WORK, a naval exercise featuring combined Thai-US surface and anti-submarine operations, underwater demolition team operations, and mine warfare. Operation TEAM WORK also featured a Thai-US Marine amphibious operation as these key allies in the Vietnam conflict recognized the importance of military coordination.

The first combined exercise designated as Cobra Gold occurred in 1982. In order to test all aspects of maritime operations, provide more realistic training,

and improve efficiency, the Royal Kingdom of Thailand and the US mutually agreed to combine several naval exercises into one – Cobra Gold.

That first Cobra Gold in 1982 witnessed four armed forces service branches, two from each nation – the Royal Thai Navy and Air Force, along with the US Navy and Marine Corps – serving together. Two years later, the US Army first participated in the exercise. So important has the Army's role become that since 1990, the role of exercise Executive Agent has alternated between USARPAC and US Marine Forces, Pacific (MARFORPAC) Headquarters. USARPAC was the Executive Agent for Cobra Gold 2006.

In 1994, Singapore and other ASEAN countries, along with Australia, accepted Thailand's invitation to attend Cobra Gold and sent contingents of officers to observe the exercise. Since that year, additional military observers from a host of nations have attended the exercise.

In Cobra Gold 2000, uniformed Singaporeans joined forces with Thai and US service members, as Singapore became the third nation to participate in Cobra Gold instead of merely observing. Two additional countries – the Philippines and Mongolia – followed suit and have also participated in Cobra Gold beginning in 2004. That year there were over 18,000 total participants.

In addition to providing an excellent training opportunity, Cobra Gold has proved an invaluable testing ground for the fielding of new weaponry or battlefield tactics as well as the impact of regional politics on a military exercise. For example, during the cross-training phase of the 1989 exercise, cavalry soldiers from the US 25th Infantry Division (Light) (25th ID(L)) gained an appreciation for

potential regional adversaries by learning and practicing communist tactics and patrolling techniques.



Another example took place the following year when soldiers successfully field tested for the Department of the Army an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV). This six-foot long piece of equipment had a nine-foot wing span and flew distances up to three miles from the operator at an altitude of 400 to 500 feet while transmitting and recording 8mm black and white video images.

SSG Paul Smith, an innovative thinker then assigned to 25ID(L)'s Headquarters, opted to manually launch the UAV while standing, braced in the open bed of a Humvee traveling at 22 miles per hour. Smith devised this unorthodox approach after discovering that launching the aircraft in the prescribed manner of running, then throwing it into the wind often resulted in the UAV's nose dive and crash, especially if there was not wind. He noted that during the recent 25ID(L)'s exercise Team Spirit UAV field testing in Korea, airspace limitations and winds above 25 knots prevented any successful launch.

Employing Smith's technique, soldiers launched the UAV successfully at least eight times during the early segment of Cobra Gold 1990.



As for the impact of regional politics on a military exercise, the perfect example came in 1991 when Royal Thai Supreme Commander General Sunthorn Kongsompong, Royal Thai Army Commander in Chief General Suchinda Kraprayoon, and their followers staged a coup d'etat of the ruling Thai government in February. US State Department approval to continue with the exercise resumed the following year with full participation. The military junta in Bangkok was ousted.



From 1992-2004, Cobra Gold became more complex and involved more nations. While such previous Cobra Gold exercises focused on countering regional aggression, Cobra Gold 2005 captured lessons learned from humanitarian actions and extensive disaster relief operations which followed the December 26, 2004, Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami. Senior exercise leadership converted Cobra Gold's CPX into a multinational interagency disaster relief workshop followed by a combined support force-structured Staff Exercise. Cobra Gold 2005 participants conducted humanitarian and civil assistance projects throughout the tsunami-devastated region. The disaster relief effort was an intricate operation and involved more than 100 different military, governmental, non-governmental, and private relief organizations.



The exercise concept for Cobra Gold 2006 featured a multi-layered design. A combined task force composed of US, Thai, Singaporean, and Japanese trained together during the CPX as a United Nations peace enforcement operation (PEO) and transitioned to a peacekeeping operation (PKO). In its first twenty-five years, Cobra Gold proved to be an increasingly complex and successful exercise from which the growing number of participants learned many valuable lessons. Given this history, there is little reason to doubt that Cobra Gold will continue well into the future.